March 18, 2020

Dear Colleagues,

The growing number of individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 over the last 48 hours necessitates a change in our response to this unprecedented public health challenge. To protect the health and safety of our community by reducing risk associated with social transmission of the virus, with the exception of activities designated “critical” PIs must make plans to:

- end all research activities conducted in Mason labs and facilities, including leased facilities, by Friday, March 20
- end all research activities conducted at off-site locations outside of their homes, including clinical settings and field sites, by Friday, March 20.

At this time, Mason anticipates that “critical” designation will be given to activities that require animal husbandry, research related to COVID-19, and maintenance associated with essential equipment and materials.

Faculty requesting “critical” activities designation MUST submit an electronic request to their associate deans or directors for research providing information in the attached form if they have not already done so. Requests for “critical” designation will be reviewed by a committee convened online by the vice president for research.

The university recognizes that the limits described herein may have implications for faculty tenure and promotion timelines as well as progress to degree for graduate students. Regrettably, given the gravity of the pandemic, these concerns alone are not sufficient to earn the “critical” designation. However, Mason leadership is actively working to identify and implement other flexibilities to mitigate these concerns; more information will be available shortly.

After Friday, March 20, Mason researchers and scholars should plan to spend the majority, if not all, of their research time working from home on activities that include but are not limited to: engaging in data collection through on-line means; writing manuscripts and dissertations; completing books; conducting literature reviews; designing research plans; engaging with collaborators in research discussions through on-line platforms; and performing data analysis. PIs should work with their teams to develop personalized plans that allow each individual to conduct research remotely to the fullest extent possible – special care should be given to plans developed for students planning to graduate this year. During this period, all PIs should continue charging to sponsored awards as planned. No immediate changes in support for research staff, students, and postdoctoral fellows should be made as long as these individuals can stay engaged in their research work in some capacity (e.g., consider activities like those described above). PIs should also ensure that they have contact information for students, postdocs, and research staff, and that group members are familiar with their research continuity of operations plans.
For critical activities, controlled access to Mason research labs and facilities will be available. When Mason labs and facilities are accessed, social distancing strategies should be maintained for critical work and flexible work schedules implemented, while also supporting strong lab safety practices. If any researcher - staff, graduate student or faculty member - conducting critical activities demonstrates minor symptoms of illness, including but not limited to cough or fever, the individual should stay home. Anyone in doubt about whether they could be ill are directed to NOT go to work.

Mason will be working with sponsors during this period to ensure that we continue to operate in a compliant and appropriate manner. Staff in our offices of sponsored programs and research integrity and assurance are prepared to work remotely and will be available to provide ongoing support. Federal guidance on support for research through grants and contracts during this public health emergency can be found here: https://www.cogr.edu/institutional-and-agency-responses-covid-19-and-additional-resources. In addition, the offices of research integrity and assurance and environmental health and safety are implementing phased plans to maintain continuity of operations for human subjects, lab support and animal husbandry.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to you for joining with us to keep our community as safe and healthy as possible. Additional guidance, including FAQs, is available at this website: https://www2.gmu.edu/research-continuity-guidelines. If you have any questions about this guidance, please don’t hesitate to reach out to your associate dean or director for research.

Sincerely,

Deborah Crawford
Vice President for Research, Innovation, and Economic Impact

S. David Wu
Provost and Executive Vice President